

**Chicago, IL** - During an ad hoc congressional hearing held today at the Shedd Aquarium, Congressman Mark Kirk (R-Highland Park) discussed a U.S. National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA) draft report that documents Lake Michigan receives more mercury pollution than any other Great Lake. The report suggests that coal-fired electric power plants are responsible for most mercury pollution. The report also calls attention to the large mercury emissions of Nevada mines that may also pollute Lake Michigan.

Kirk joined Congressman Rahm Emanuel (D-Chicago), author of The Great Lakes Restoration Act (H.R. 792), and Congressman Vern Ehlers (R-Michigan) -- Chairman of the Environment, Technology and Standards Subcommittee of the House Science Committee -- and author of The Great Lakes Environmental Protection and Restoration Programs Reauthorization Act (H.R. 2129) -- for the hearing that took testimony from Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, a strong proponent of protecting the Great Lakes.

“This new federal study shows that Chicagoland has become a mercury hotspot,” said Congressman Kirk. “We must take more aggressive action to protect families living in the Lake Michigan region. Beyond mercury pollution, human threats to our Great Lakes ecosystem include sewage dumping and shoreline storage of nuclear waste. These are just two of the reasons why restoration legislation is so critically needed. Several marine invaders like the Asian Carp and the Zebra Mussel are also threatening our country’s largest freshwater resource. The NOAA report confirms what we already know – we need to speed up the cleanup of Lake Michigan.”

Reps. Kirk, Emanuel and Ehlers heard testimony on the need to protect the Great Lakes from several witnesses including: Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, Pat Montanio, Ecosystem Goal Team, NOAA, Howard Learner, Executive Director of the Environmental Law and Policy Center, Jeff Boehm, Senior Vice President of Animal Health and Conservation Science-Joint Chair, Shedd Aquarium, and Cameron Davis, Executive Director, Alliance for the Great Lakes.

“It is important to emphasize the importance of protecting and restoring the Great Lakes,” said Representative Vernon J. Ehlers. “The comprehensive legislation I and Congressman Kirk introduced will clean up and protect this incredible resource. I look forward to moving forward on this bill as soon as possible.”

Federal scientists caution that while eating Lake Michigan predator fish can raise concerns, mercury levels are not dangerous to those who drink rainwater or get it on their skin. Mercury becomes dangerous when it is concentrated up the food chain in fish and wildlife.

Coal-fired electric power plants were exempt from adhering to the original mercury restrictions under the Clean Air Act. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently imposed requirements for power plants to reduce their mercury emissions by 70 percent by 2017, but many Republicans and Democrats in Congress feel mercury emissions need to be reduced to lower levels sooner.

“Mercury contamination in Illinois is so widespread that we now have a statewide fish advisory warning people to limit their consumption of a number of predator species, including walleye and northern pike, two popular Lake Michigan game fish,” said Kirk. “One in twelve American women of childbearing age has mercury levels in their blood above the levels considered safe for the developing child. Approximately 14,000 babies in Illinois are born every year at risk of neurological damage due to mercury. The evidence is clear. We must set stricter standards that will encourage the development of new pollution control technologies that will reduce mercury emissions to protect our health.”

To address Great Lakes concerns, President Bush created the “Great Lakes Regional Collaboration” to study the problems facing the Great Lakes and to come up with a strategic plan to protect them. While many in Congress support the work of the Collaboration, they feel that threats to the Great Lakes are already well known and need little reflection.

“When I came to Congress, two things stood in the way of Great Lakes restoration: first, despite numerous studies, no one could agree on what needed to be done and second, the Great Lakes programs needed funding. Through the hard work and leadership of many through out the region, we’re solving our first problem through the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration,” said Congressman Rahm Emanuel. “Now it’s up to us to secure the funding to make restoration a reality.”

The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration’s strategic plan to restore the Great Lakes is scheduled to be announced this December. In the meantime, Congress has made progress advancing legislation and funding to protect our Lakes from invasive species and pollution. Congress doubled funding this year for the Great Lakes Legacy Act (authored by Rep. Ehlers) which established a program to clean up polluted Great Lakes harbors (e.g. Waukegan Harbor).

The Army Corp of Engineers is also building a second, more permanent barrier in the Chicago Ship & Sanitary Canal to block Asian Carp from entering the Great Lakes.

Congressman Kirk will soon introduce bipartisan legislation to eliminate 90 percent of invasive species that enter the Lakes inside the ballast tanks of foreign freighters. While ships entering the Great Lakes who carry ballast water must already flush their tanks, “No Ballast on Board Ships” (NOBOBS) take no current action. Small amounts of water and sediment inside such tanks still contain invasive species that can harm the Great Lakes. Representative Kirk’s draft bill would require ballast-water exchanges and salinity shocks inside all foreign ballast tanks to kill potential invasive species.

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